

DUAL-DAMASCENE PROCESS AND ASSOCIATED FLOATING METAL STRUCTURES

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5 BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field Of The Invention

The present invention relates generally to integrated circuits, and more particularly to integrated circuit structures and fabrication processes.

2. Description Of The Background Art

10 An integrated circuit typically includes multiple sections for performing various functions. The sections may be on one level of an integrated circuit, or in separate levels. A conductive line, commonly referred to as an interconnect line, electrically couples two or more sections that are on the same level of the integrated circuit. To couple sections that are on different levels, a via is provided between the levels. The
15 via is filled with a conductive material. One end of the via is coupled to an interconnect line on an upper level, while the other end of the via is coupled to an interconnect line on a lower level. A dielectric layer is provided between levels for electrical isolation.

The speed at which a signal is propagated in an integrated circuit is limited by the delay through the interconnect line carrying the signal. This delay, commonly referred
20 to as "RC delay," is due to the resistance and capacitance of the interconnect line. Reducing the resistance or capacitance of the interconnect line lowers its RC delay and increases signal propagation speed. Thus, reducing the RC delay of interconnect lines plays a major role in making integrated circuits run faster.

Using a low-resistance interconnect material such as copper helps lower the resulting RC delay. To reduce capacitance, a dielectric material having a low dielectric constant, referred to as a low-k dielectric, may be used between interconnect lines or layers.

5 A low-k dielectric region may be formed by using a TEOS oxide to fill gaps between metal lines. The inability of the TEOS oxide to completely fill the gaps results in air gaps between the metal lines. Because air has a dielectric constant of 1, the resulting air gaps help lower capacitance. However, the formation of the resulting air gaps is not controllable, and their size varies depending on the metal etch profile and available space. Additionally, the TEOS oxide fills the space between metal layers. Various relatively complicated unity-k dielectric structures have also been proposed to lower capacitance on metal lines.

SUMMARY

15 The present invention relates to a dual-damascene process for forming a floating metal structure. The invention may be used in a variety of applications including in the formation of interconnect lines, for example.

20 In one embodiment, an interconnect line on one level of an integrated circuit is electrically coupled to another interconnect line on another level. The two layers of interconnects may be coupled together using a via. To reduce capacitance between the interconnect lines, an air core is formed between them. The air core may be formed by using a chemistry that includes a noble gas fluoride to etch a sacrificial layer between the interconnect layers.

In one embodiment, the sacrificial layer includes a silicon material such as polycrystalline silicon or amorphous silicon, while the noble gas fluoride includes xenon difluoride.

5 These and other features and advantages of the present invention will be readily apparent to persons of ordinary skill in the art upon reading the entirety of this disclosure, which includes the accompanying drawings and claims.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIGS. 1A-1M show sectional views schematically illustrating a dual-damascene process in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

10 FIG. 2 shows a flow diagram of a method of forming a floating metal structure in a dual-damascene process in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

The use of the same reference label in different drawings indicates the same or like components.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

15 In the present disclosure, numerous specific details are provided, such as examples of materials, thicknesses, steps, and structures to provide a thorough understanding of embodiments of the invention. Persons of ordinary skill in the art will recognize, however, that the invention may be practiced without one or more of the specific details, or with other materials, thicknesses, steps, and structures. In other
20 instances, well-known details are not shown or described to avoid obscuring aspects of the invention. For example, masking steps and seed layers are not shown or described for clarity of illustration.

It is to be noted that as used in the present disclosure, the terms "overlying" and "underlying" refer to the relative placement of two layers that may or may not be directly in contact with each other; that is, the two layers may be separated by another layer. Additionally, the term "sample" is used in the present disclosure to refer to an article on which one or more integrated circuit levels are formed. A sample may be a wafer or a substrate, for example.

The present invention relates to dual-damascene processes and floating metal structures. A floating metal structure is also disclosed in commonly-assigned US Application No._____, Attorney Docket No. 10002.000300 (PM01042), entitled "METHOD OF FORMING A FLOATING METAL STRUCTURE IN AN INTEGRATED CIRCUIT", filed on January 29, 2002, by Mira Ben-Tzur, Krishnaswamy Ramkumar, James Hunter, T. J. Rodgers, Mike Bruner, and Kiyoko Ikeuchi. The just mentioned US Application is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

A dual-damascene process in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention is now described with reference to the sectional views of FIGS. 1A-1M. Referring to FIG. 1A, there is shown a metallization level 100 on which a metallization level according to an embodiment of the present invention may be formed. It is to be understood, however, that metallization level 100 is being provided herein only for illustration purposes; metallization levels according to embodiments of the present invention may be employed as a first, last, or intervening metallization level.

Metallization level 100 includes metal structures 102. Metal structures 102 may be formed using a damascene, dual-damascene, or other metallization process. Metal structures 102 may be made of copper or aluminum, for example. Dielectrics 101

electrically isolate one metal structure 102 from another. Dielectrics 101 may be of TEOS or other low-k dielectric material, for example.

In FIG. 1B, a capping layer 103 is deposited overlying metallization level 100. Capping layer 103 separates metallization level 100 from an overlying metallization level; capping layer 103 may also function as a barrier layer for minimizing metal diffusion. For example, capping layer 103 may be of silicon nitride (Si_3N_4) deposited to a thickness of 500 Angstroms by plasma enhanced chemical vapor deposition (PECVD). Other non-conductive materials may also be used instead of silicon nitride. For example, silicon carbide or silicon nitride carbide may also be used as a capping layer 103.

Still referring to FIG. 1B, a support layer 104 is deposited overlying capping layer 103. Support layer 104 provides structural support to a subsequently formed floating metal structure overlying metallization level 100. In one embodiment, the floating metal structure includes a via and an interconnect line; the via is formed through support layer 104 in that embodiment. Support layer 104 may be a silicon dioxide layer (SiO_2) deposited to a thickness of 3000 Angstroms by PECVD, for example. Advantageously, support layer 104 is of a low-k dielectric material.

In FIG. 1C, a sacrificial layer 105 is deposited overlying support layer 104. Sacrificial layer 105 is used to define the subsequently formed floating metal structure, and is advantageously of a material preferentially etched by a noble gas fluoride. For example, sacrificial layer 105 may be of a silicon material such as polycrystalline silicon or amorphous silicon. The silicon material may be etched using a noble gas fluoride such as xenon difluoride (XeF_2). A sacrificial layer 105 of polycrystalline silicon may be

deposited by PECVD or physical vapor deposition (PVD) to a thickness of 5000 Angstroms, for example.

In FIG. 1D, a non-conductive layer 106 is optionally deposited overlying sacrificial layer 105. Non-conductive layer 106 provides additional structural support to the subsequently formed floating metal structure, and may not be needed in some applications. Non-conductive layer 106 may be a silicon nitride layer deposited by PECVD to a thickness of 500 Angstroms, for example. Other non-conductive materials may also be used instead of silicon nitride. For example, silicon dioxide or silicon carbide may also be used as a non-conductive layer 106.

In FIGS. 1E and 1F, a dual-damascene etch process is performed on the sample of FIG. 1D to form vias 108 and interconnect line patterns 107. Any type of dual-damascene etch process may be used to form vias 108 and interconnect line patterns 107 without detracting from the merits of the present invention. For example, either a "via first" or a "line first" dual-damascene etch process may be employed to form vias 108 and interconnect line patterns 107.

The following example illustrates a line first dual-damascene etch process. Referring to FIG. 1E, vias 108 are formed by etching through layers 106, 105, 104, and 103. Thereafter, as shown in FIG. 1F, interconnect line patterns 107 are formed by etching layers 106 and 105.

In FIG. 1G, a barrier layer 161 is deposited on the sample of FIG. 1F prior to depositing a metal in interconnect line patterns 107 and vias 108. For example, a barrier layer 161 of tantalum/tantalum nitride may be deposited by PVD.

In FIG. 1H, a metal 109 is deposited in vias 108 and interconnect line patterns 107. Metal 109 fills vias 108 to form via connections to metallization level 100, and fills interconnect line patterns 107 to form interconnect lines coupled to metal structures 102. A metal 109 of copper may be deposited by first depositing a copper seed layer, followed by a bulk copper electroplating step. (The seed layer is not depicted for clarity.)

In FIG. 1I, metal 109 is planarized. For example, a metal 109 of copper may be planarized by chemical-mechanical polishing (CMP).

In FIG. 1J, a capping layer 162 is deposited on the sample of FIG. 1I. Capping layer 162 helps minimize copper migration and provides structural support in applications where additional levels will be formed over the subsequently formed floating metal structure. Capping layer 162 may be a silicon nitride layer deposited to a thickness of 500 Angstroms by PECVD, for example. Other materials may also be used as a capping layer 162 including silicon carbide.

In FIG. 1K, capping layer 162 and non-conductive layer 106 are etched to form windows 110. Windows 110 expose the underlying sacrificial layer 105.

Prior to a subsequent step of etching sacrificial layer 105, native oxide on the surface of sacrificial layer 105 may have to be removed. For example, a sacrificial layer 105 of polycrystalline silicon may have native oxide thereon. In that case, the sample of FIG. 1K is first dipped in a pre-etch solution of ethylene glycol and ammonium fluoride prior to etching sacrificial layer 105. A suitable commercially available pre-etch solution includes that of the type available from ACSI, Inc. of Milpitas, California under the name NOE Etch I™ solution.

In FIG. 1L, the sample of FIG. 1K is placed in an environment including a noble gas fluoride to etch sacrificial layer 105. For example, the sample of FIG. 1K may be placed in a vacuum chamber (not shown) where a noble gas fluoride is introduced. The sample is left in the chamber for a time sufficient to etch most of the remaining sacrificial
5 layer 105 and form air cores 112 (e.g., 2 to 5 minutes; chamber pressure of 50×10^{-3} Torr). The process parameters for etching sacrificial layer 105 using a noble gas fluoride depend on the chamber used, the physical details of the sample, etc.

Preferably, the noble gas fluoride includes xenon difluoride. Other noble gas fluorides that may be used include those of krypton and argon. Xenon difluoride has
10 been used as an etchant in micro-electro-mechanical systems (MEMS) applications. For example, US Patent No. 5,726,480 issued to Pister discloses the use of xenon difluoride in the fabrication of MEMS structures. US Application No. 09/952,626, Attorney Docket No. SLM-08300, entitled "MICROELECTRONIC MECHANICAL SYSTEM AND METHODS", filed by Mike Bruner on September 13, 2001, also
15 discloses the use of xenon difluoride as an etchant. The aforementioned disclosures by Pister and Bruner are incorporated herein by reference in their entirety.

It is to be noted that unlike a MEMS structure which employs metals primarily for mechanical functions, an integrated circuit employs metals primarily to carry electrical signals. Reducing the capacitance on a metal line, while of minimal concern to the
20 fabrication of MEMS structures, is important in integrated circuit applications.

Still referring to FIG. 1L, the step of etching sacrificial layer 105 using a noble gas fluoride results in air cores 112 surrounding metal 109. Each metal 109 is now a "floating" metal structure in that an air-filled space (i.e., an air core 112) surrounds it.

An air core 112 is a unity-k dielectric region because air has a dielectric constant approximately equal to 1. Thus, air cores 112 lower the capacitance on metals 109 and help increase signal propagation speeds. As can be appreciated, a method of forming a floating metal structure in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention
5 allows for the creation of a unity-k dielectric region without having to employ complex structural systems.

Continuing with FIG. 1M, a topside layer 113 is deposited on the sample of FIG. 1L. Topside layer 113 provides a base on which overlying metallization levels may be formed. Topside layer 113 may be a silicon nitride layer deposited by PECVD to a
10 thickness of 500 Angstroms if it is a middle layer or 9000 Angstroms if it is the last layer, for example. Topside layer 113 may also be of other non-conductive material including oxynitride.

Referring now to FIG. 2, there is shown a flow diagram of a method of forming a floating metal structure in a dual-damascene process according to an embodiment of
15 the present invention. In step 202, a support layer is deposited overlying a metallization level. The support layer, which may be of silicon dioxide, provides structural support to a subsequently formed floating metal structure.

In step 204, a sacrificial layer is deposited overlying the support layer. The sacrificial layer defines the subsequently formed floating metal structure. The sacrificial
20 layer may be a silicon material such as polycrystalline silicon or amorphous silicon. Optionally, a non-conductive layer such as silicon nitride is deposited overlying the sacrificial layer to provide additional structural support to the floating metal structure.

In step 206, a via and an interconnect line pattern are formed in the sacrificial layer. The via and the interconnect line pattern may be formed using a dual-damascene etch process.

5 In step 208, a metal is deposited in the via and the interconnect line pattern. This results in an interconnect line coupled to a metal line in a lower metallization level.

In step 210, the metal is planarized.

In step 212, a capping layer is deposited overlying the metal. The capping layer helps minimize copper migration and provides structural support in applications where additional levels will be formed over the subsequently formed floating metal structure.

10 In step 214, a window is formed at least through the capping layer (and any other layers between the capping layer and the sacrificial layer) to expose the sacrificial layer. Native oxide on the exposed surface of the sacrificial layer may have to be removed prior to the subsequent etching of the sacrificial layer.

15 In step 216, the sacrificial layer is etched using a chemistry that includes a noble gas fluoride. For example, a sacrificial layer of polycrystalline silicon may be etched using a chemistry that includes xenon difluoride. This etching step "floats" the metal by creating an air core surrounding the metal. The air core provides a unity-k dielectric region that lowers the resulting capacitance on the metal.

20 An improved dual-damascene process and associated floating metal structures have been disclosed. While specific embodiments have been provided, it is to be understood that these embodiments are for illustration purposes and not limiting. Many additional embodiments will be apparent to persons of ordinary skill in the art reading

this disclosure. Thus, the present invention is limited only by the following claims.

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